DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 218 623 CS 206 979

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TITLE Motivations, Media Use, and Electoral Decision Making.
PUB DATE Jul 82
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (65th, Athens, OH, July 25-28, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Citizen Participation; *Decision Making; *Elections; *Information Needs; *Media Research; *Motivation; *Public Opinion; Surveys; Use Studies
IDENTIFIERS *Media Use

ABSTRACT

Most of the research on motivations and media use has assumed that there is some general motivation that directs habitual media behavior. Recent work on motivations, however, suggests that it may be valuable to distinguish between general needs and more specific needs, both of which may direct media behavior. For example, regular media use might well be the result of a general motivation to keep informed. On the other hand, use of specific campaign media materials, such as advertisements or political debates, might be directed by a specific need on the part of voters for information to help make election decisions. This set of expectations was tested using data from a telephone survey of registered voters in Ohio during the 1980 United States presidential campaign. It was postulated that home owners (as opposed to renters), the married, those high in formal education, the older, white, and males would be higher in general need for information. As expected, the results indicated general information need was related to general media use habits. Those persons reporting high levels of need for information read news magazines, watched the national television news, and read a daily newspaper. There was no support at all for the belief that voter uncertainty was related to the need for election information. Specifically, the data indicated that a general need for information was viewed as a product of the respondent's background and social situation, while the need for information for a specific election decision was the product of general media use habits and possibly uncertainty about the election decision to be made. (HOD)

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Theory and Methodology Division

Motivations, Media Use, and Electoral Decision Making

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Presented to the Theory and Methodology Division of the Association for Education in Journalism at the annual convention in Athens, Ohio, July 1982.

CS206977

Motivations, Media Use, and Electoral Decision Making

Most of the research on motivations and media use has assumed that there is some general motivation which directs habitual media behavior. Given little attention in the literature is the relationship between a general motivation and the need for information in a particular decisional situation. Recent theoretical and empirical work on motivations, however, suggests that it may be valuable to distinguish between general needs and more specific needs, both of which may direct media behavior.

The distinction between general and specific motivations can be rather dramatically illustrated in a political context, where regular media use might well be the result of a general motivation to keep informed. On the other hand, use of specific campaign media materials, such as advertisements or political debates, might be directed by a specific need on the part of voters for information to help make election decisions. The effects of general needs or motives on use of specific campaign materials might well be rather indirect.

In fact, the early research on motivations and use of political materials made this sort of distinction. Blumler and McQuail (1969) isolated five specific motives people gave for seeking political content in the mass media. Included in this list were a general motivation (labeled surveillance seeking) to keep informed about the political environment, as well as a specific motivation (labeled vote guidance seeking) to seek information for assistance in making an electoral decision. Perhaps in part because of unnecessary similarities in question wording, these conceptually distinct motivations were found to be empirically highly related. The result was that McLeod and Becker (1974) and Becker (1976) found it difficult to distinguish between

these concepts in subsequent data analysis. The result of this empirical difficulty seems to have been a blurring of what is potentially a theoretically important distinction between a general motivation to keep oneself informed on public affairs and a need for information in a particular political context.

Some empirical evidence is available, however, suggesting that this distinction between general and specific motivations is rather important. For example, Becker, Cobbey and Sobowale (1977) found in their study of the 1976 debates that voters' reasons for watching the encounters between the candidates changed from debate to debate, presumably because the early debates satisfied some of their original needs. Similarly, McLeod, Durall, Ziemke and Bybee (1979) and O'Keefe and Mendelsohn (1979) presented evidence that voters judged the debates to be helpful in satisfying some of the goals they had for viewing them.

In a more general context, these and other studies underscore the importance of distinguishing between motivations for using the mass media and gratification received from that use. While McLeod, Bybee and Durall (1982) found mixed support for their expectation that exposure to the 1976 debates actually helped predict satisfaction of specific needs, Palmgreen and his colleagues (Palmgreen and Rayburn 1979; Palmgreen, Wenner and Rayburn, 1980; and Palmgreen, Wenner and Rayburn, 1981) have reported a series of analyses supportive of the distinction between motivations and gratifications received. Though the specific measures used place limitations on the findings, the Palmgreen data suggest that use of public television and selection of specific news programs on commercial television can be predicted by an examination of the match between audience members' needs and the audience members' reports of the ability of these materials to satisfy those needs.

Perhaps even more promising is the work of Galloway and Meek (1981), which shows that a measure combining audience motives and expectations about

the abilities of specific programs to satisfy those motives is predictive of viewing of specific television programs. The work is consistent with the theoretical arguments of Van Leuven (1981) which are cast in terms of what has come to be known "expectancy theory." Van Leuven, as well as Becker and Rafaeli (1981), argue that audience reactions to the new media must be understood in terms of audience evaluations of the ability of these media to satisfy needs. The work of Katz, Gurevitch and Hass (1973), Mendelsohn and O'Keefe (1976), Lometi, Reeves and Bybee (1977), and Kippax and Murray (1980) reinforces this position. A summary model incorporating audience evaluations of media products as well as motivations for use of such materials has been offered by McLeod and Becker (1981).

In summary, this literature suggests that general motivations for media use must be considered within a context which allows for the possibility that such motives may not predict specific media behaviors precisely because they have already been satisfied. Conceptually and empirically, it may be valuable to distinguish between general motives and specific ones. Each may have distinct, though related, antecedents and consequences.

Specific Expectations

Considerable literature has developed suggesting that general audience motivations for use of the media have their origins in both the background experiences of the audience members as well as the specific social situation within which the audience member operates. The work of Blumler (1979) in the political area and that of Rubin (1981) in the nonpolitical context are illustrative. The literature leads to the general expectation that audience members highest in motivation to keep informed on public affairs (or surveillance motivation, in the original terminology) are those persons in social situations placing a premium on such public affairs knowledge, those persons who are attached to the community and those highest in formal education.

This general need for information, in turn, is expected to lead to habitual use of the mass media, as indicated by traditional measures of media use. The linkage has been established by research cited above as well as other studies both in a nonpolitical and political context.

Studies have consistently linked use of the mass media with knowledge of public affairs (Becker, McCombs and McLeod, 1975), leading to the expectation that high levels of media use also should be related to low levels of uncertainty in vote decision making situations and high confidence in the choice made. In other words, persons who are the best informed should be the most certain of their decisions.

Similar reasoning leads to the expectation that uncertainty in the electoral decision context should be related to use of specific media materials presenting the opportunity to alleviate that uncertainty. Chaffee and Choe (1980) and Goldman and Whitney (1981) have found that persons undecided about their vote decision have distictive media habits during the campaign period to help with that decision.

Methodology

This set of expectations was tested using data from a survey of registered voters in Columbus and surrounding Franklin County, Ohio, during the 1980 presidential election. Telephone interviews were conducted with a probability sample of 531 voters whose names were selected from registration lists. The interviews were conducted between Oct. 8 and 15. Trained interviewers administered a schedule of approximately 50 items, taking approximately 15 minutes.[1]

After the general election a probabilistically chosen subsample of 123 voters was recontacted. Of these, 110 (79.7%) submitted to a second interview. This schedule contained 13 items dealing with the election decision made and use of mass media materials during the final weeks of the campaign.

Incorporated into the October survey were traditional measures of type of housing unit of the respondent, marital status, education, age, race and sex. For the reasons noted above, home owners (as opposed to renters), the married, those high in formal education, the older, whites and males were expected to be higher in a general need for information. As a further index of the information demands of the respondents interpersonal environment, two items were included to measure frequency of discussion of public affairs issues. The first question asked how frequently the respondent discussed "problems and issues facing this country" when he or she "get(s) together with your friends." The second question asked about similar situations involving "your family." Responses on a three-point scale were correlated .40 and were combined through simple addition to form a two-item index. The index was expected to be correlated with general information need because those persons frequently having such interpersonal discussion situations should need information more than those not in such situations in order to participate in the discussion. The index does not measure information-seeking from such an interpersonal situation. Such interpersonal information-seeking would be expected to be a consequence of need for information, not an antecedent. Clearly, interpersonal situation is a complex phenomenon as it relates to the need variable.

General media use measures included in the first wave of the study were of readership of a newsmagazine (scored dichotomously), number of days of watching of the early evening national news, number of days per week the respondent listened to radio "to pay particular attention to news," and number of days per week of newspaper readership. Two additional measures of media use specific to the early campaign, that is, the campaign prior to the time of the interview, also were included. The first was a general question about attention paid to information about the election having appeared in the media. The second simply asked if the respondent had watched

the Sept. 21 debate between Ronald Reagan and John Anderson, who was running as an independent candidate. All general media use measures as well as the two early campaign measures were expected to be consequences of general need for information.

The media use measures also were expected to determine vote uncertainty. Uncertainty was measured by asking the respondents for whom they intended to vote and for those with a decision how confident they were that they had made the best decision. These two measures were combined with those with no decision labeled most uncertain and those with a decision in which they had confidence labeled most certain. Uncertainty was expected to lead to a need for election information.

Various media use behaviors were expected to be consequences of the need for election information. Measures of two such behaviors were included in the October interview. The first asked respondents to indicate if they would like to see another presidential debate held before the November election. The second noted that during the final weeks of the campaign the presidential candidates would be using various advertisements in the media. Respondents were asked to indicate how much attention they anticipated paying to these advertisements. In the post-election survey, respondents were asked if they paid attention to these advertisements, to recall specific themes from the advertisements, how much attention they paid to media coverage of the final weeks of the campaign, to recall the endorsements of the local newspapers in the presidential race, whether they had watched the Oct. 28 debate between President Carter and Ronald Reagan, whether they watched the debate to learn about the issues and backgrounds of the candidates and separately whether they watched the debate because it was the only thing on television that night, and how often in the final weeks of the campaign they talked with family and friends about the presidential candidates.

General information need and need for election specific information

were measured separately in the October instrument. Two items were used to measure general information need. Respondents were asked how important it was to them to "know what is going on in government in Washington and around the nation" and "to keep up with the latest news events around the nation." Following the questions on presidential vote choice and vote choice in other elections on the ballot, respondents were read three statements and asked if the feelings expressed were also their own. The first said "Some people say they would like more information on how the presidential candidates...stand on the issues." The next item said "Some people also say they would like to know more about the personalities, characteristics and backgrounds of the presidential candidates." Finally, respondents were told that "People also say they just wish they knew what the various presidential candidates would do once they were elected." These five items and the two distinct variables they were intended to measure are at the center of the analyses which follow.

Results

Before these five measures were used to form indices of the two motivational measures, they were subjected to an orthogonal factor analysis. The results appear in Table 1. As expected, the two general items factored separately from the three campaign specific items, presenting preliminary evidence of the empirical as well as conceptual distinctiveness of the two concepts. Of the three items in the campaign specific set, the third has the weakest correlation with factor loading of .43. This also was the most endorsed item of the three, as Table 1 indicates. In fact, the level of endorsement for all five high items is high, and the standard deviations are rather low.

The index of general information need was created simply by summing the scores on the first two items in Table 1. The index has an improved standard deviation of .98. The final three items were weighted by factor

scores and summed to create the index of election information need. The third item in Table 1 received a weight of .35 on the index, the fourth a weight of .49, and the fifth a weight of .19. The standard deviation of the new index is 1.86. As an index of internal reliability, an omega coefficient for each measure was computed. For the general information need measure, omega was .66. For election information need, omega was .72. Range of possible scores for omega is from 0.0 to 1.0 (Heise and Bohrnstedt, 1970). The correlation between the two indices of information need was only .15.

Figure 1 presents the zero-order relationships among the various variables in the model. The arrows indicate that a relationship was predicted. The variables on the left hand side of the table are those labeled background or social situational variables, and the variable producing the largest single coefficient is frequency of public affairs discussion. Those persons with frequent discussions are more likely to report high levels of need for information in general than those with infrequent discussions. Marital status, age, and housing unit also are related to information need, though none of these relationships is nearly as large as for the discussion variable. Those persons less well attached to community (the young, the single, the renters) do report lower levels of information need than do those with a stronger attachment to the community. Sex of respondent and education show significant but very slight coefficients here. The better educated and the males report just slightly higher levels of information need. Race of respondent is of no consequence.

As expected, general information need is related to general media use habits. Those persons reporting high levels of need for information are more likely to report reading news magazines, watching the national television news and reading a daily newspaper. Radio listening is not

related to this need, however, reflecting, perhaps, the fact that this medium is minimally useful in learning about national news events, though possibly of more value for learning about local events. General information need also is related to early campaign media use and watching of the first debate. Perhaps these last two relationships can be viewed as something like residuals, that is, the effects of general information need on campaign specific media use regardless of the effects of general information use. Or perhaps they should be viewed simply as logical covariates of general information use up to this point in the campaign.

The correlations of the general media use variables with vote uncertainty are surprisingly and disappointingly small. Only the two campaign media use variables show the expected relationship with uncertainty, and here the relationship is significant but slight. There is a tendency for those who watched the first debate and who followed the early campaign news in the media to be less uncertain about their vote choice than those who did not watch the debate or follow the campaign. None of the relationships for the other media use variables is even significant.

There is no support at all for the expectation that vote uncertainty is related to a need for election information. The correlation is a mere .02. The need for election information, on the other hand, is related to all of the subsequent media behaviors in the fashion expected. Those persons stating a need for information about the candidates also were more likely to express an interest in a second debate and interest in the expected late campaign advertisements. They were more likely than those without this need to correctly recall the endorsements of the local newspapers, suggesting they actually followed these materials, more likely to report watching the debate to learn about the issues and background of the candidates, and less likely to report watching the debates because they were the only programs on television. These relationships were significant even with the relatively

small size of the post-election sample. Smaller relationships were shown suggesting that those with a need for campaign information also were more likely to actually recall the themes in the advertisements and to pay attention to late campaign news.

While individual relationships shown in Figure 1 are small, as is usually the case in analyses employing media motivational measures, the cumulative effects of these variables is somewhat more substantial, excepting those dealing with the uncertainty variable. Table 2 shows, for example, that the multiple correlation coefficient for the regression of general media use on the antecedent variables in Figure 1 is .42. The canonical correlation coefficient, which is somewhat comparable to the multiple R, is .49 for the relationship between general media use and the general media behaviors. The canonical correlation for the relationship between campaign information need and the subsequent media behaviors is .43.

With the exception of the relationships involving vote uncertainty, then, the theoretical relationships hypothesized have some empirical support. The data presented to this point, however, do not necessarily argue that the key distinction made here between general information need and election information need is a crucial one. Two rather simple analyses speak to that point.

First, the position of each of the gratification variables was switched in the model to give some notion of the comparability of the two measures. In other words, if nothing were to change as a result of replacing general information need with election information need in the model underlying Figure 1, that would mean that there is no empirical distinctiveness to the two concepts. In fact, the multiple R between the variables in the left most column in Figure 1 and need for election information is .23, rather than the .42 shown in Table 2 for this relationship using general information need. The relationship between election information need and general media use

behaviors produces a canonical correlation of .11, compared with the .49 for general information need. General information need also produces a slightly smaller canonical correlation with subsequent media behaviors (.39) than is shown for the election information need variable. And general information need is correlated -.04, rather than positive .02, with uncertainty. In other words, both are unrelated, though the sign is incorrect for the general information measure.

The second analysis involved a simple regression of need for election information on each set of variables, moving leftward through the model in Figure 1. The expectation was that once the variables posited as intervening between general information need and election information need were entered into the equation, general information need itself would add little new variance. In fact, that seems to be the case. The multiple R for the general media use measures and uncertainty, with election information need as the dependent variable, is .13. The R changes to .16 when general information need is added. The increased variance explained is significant at the .05 level, but the actual change in R is rather slight. When the background and social situation block of variables is added to the equation, the multiple R increases to .29, suggesting that the effects of these variables may not be exclusively through the variables posed as intervening in Figure 1. Closer analysis shows, however, that the relationship is slightly more complex than originally suggested. Education is the single strong variable in the final block related to election information need in the final regression equation. But the sign of the relationship in the final regression equation is opposite the simple, zero-order relationship. Education is negatively related to need for election information at the zero-order (r=-.16) level, as the model in Figure 1 would suggest should be true. When the intervening variables are controlled, however, this relationship becomes positive (standardized beta = .20). So the intervening variables are significant in

understanding even this relationship between education and need for election information need.

These two simple analyses, then, add increased support to the model as offered in Figure 1. In general, a transposition of the need variables suggests their original order is the better one. And the regression analysis suggests that general information need has its effects indirectly, through media use variables such as those shown here.

These analyses, however, do not clarify the problems in the data relating to the uncertainty variable. Again, however, some additional analyses are helpful. Respondents in the October survey were asked their vote intention on two other races, for a local congressman and for one of the U.S. Senators. Uncertainty could only be measured in these cases by looking at whether the respondent had already made a decision, rather than via the two-item index used for uncertainty about the presidential election. The latter of course, produced more variance than the indices for the Senate and Congress races. But both of these two variables show stronger relationships, in the predicted direction, with the media use variables than does the measure of uncertainty used in Figure 1. That measure, of course, dealt only with the presidential race. And the measures of uncertainty about the congressional race is correlated .12 with a need for election information. While that is still a small correlation, it is a distinct improvement over what is shown in Figure 1 and suggests that the problems with the original data may be more a result of measurement problems than weak theorizing. Perhaps the measures used to form election uncertainty should be broadened in the future. The narrow concentration on the presidential race, necessary here because of the debate measures and the wording of many of the questions, may have contributed to some of the problems.

Conclusions

The research reported here stemmed from a concern with existing work in

the uses and motives area which has failed to distinguish between a general need for information and a need for information in specific, decision-making contexts. The data which are reported are consistent with that conceptual distinction.

Specifically, the data indicate that a general need for information can be viewed as a product of the respondent's background and social situation, while the need for information for a specific election decision is the product of general media use habits and possibly uncertainty about the election decision to be made. The consequences of general information need are general media use behaviors, while the consequence of the specific decisional information need is media use directed at satisfying that need, that is, media use of help in making a decision.

Footnotes

1. The omnibus survey was sponsored in part by one of the local newspapers. Interviewers were students enrolled in an upper division and graduate research methods class. Return rate was 68.4%. The assistance of Sharon Dunwoody in fielding the survey is acknowledged.

Table 1

Varimax Rotated Factor Matrix for Five Motivation Items

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Mean [1]	SD
Important to know what is going on in govt. in nation	.78	.07	2.66	.53
Important to keep up with latest events in nation	.73	.11	2.59	.56
Need more information on candidates' stands	.12	.59	2.38	.76
Need more information on candidates' personalities and backgrounds	.00	.70	1.94	.76
Want to know what candidates would do if elected	.07	.43	2.55	.71

N = 526

1. A three point scale was used for each measure.

Table 2

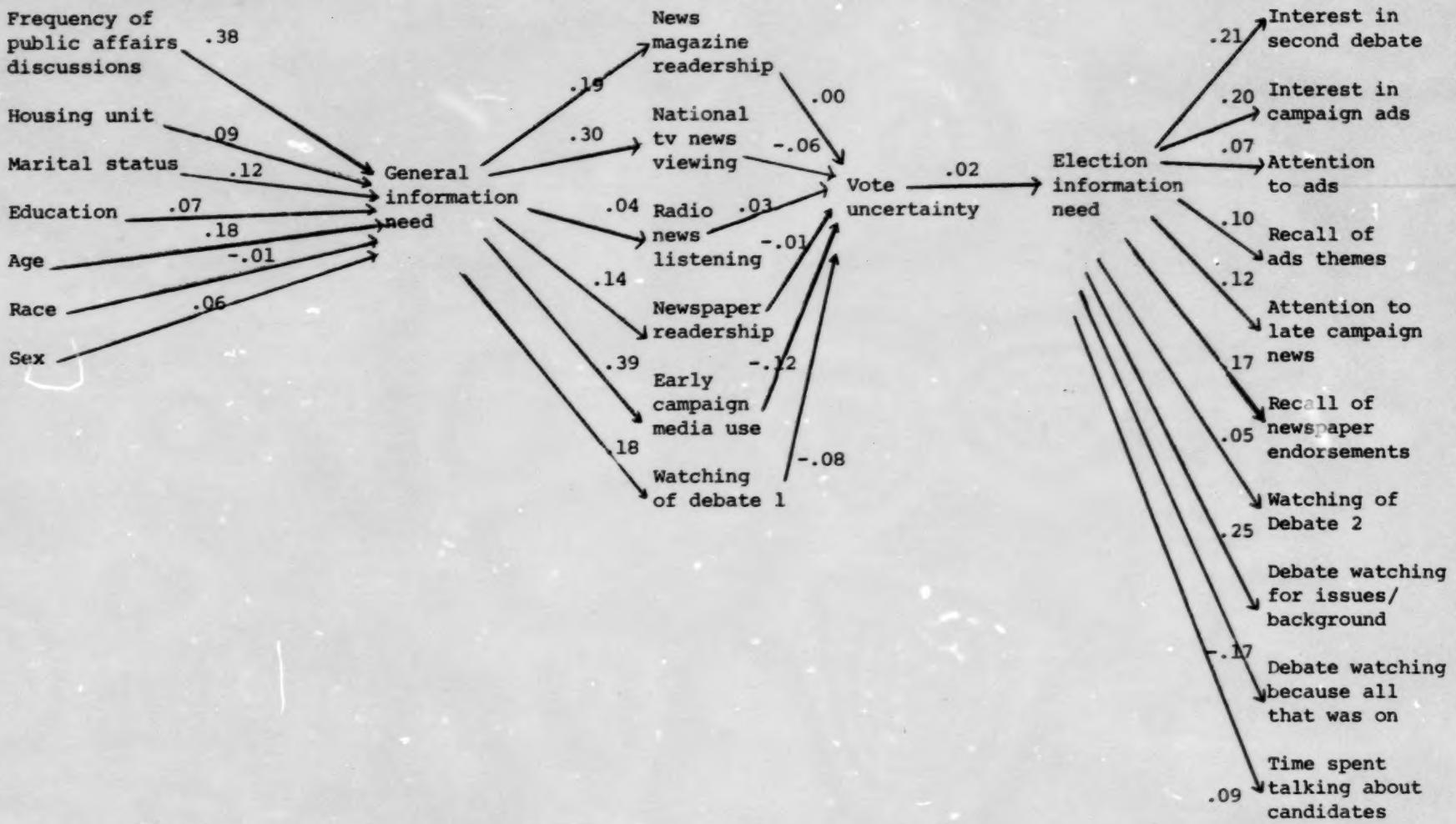
Multiple Rs and Canonical Coefficients for Figure 1

	Multiple R	Canonical Correlation Coefficient
Background and social situation variables to General information need	.42*	
General information need to general media use		.49*
General media use to vote uncertainty	.14	
Vote uncertainty to Election information need	.02	
Election information need to Campaign media use		.43*

*Significant at the .05 level.

Figure 1

Zero-Order Relationships Among Variables in the Model



The correlation coefficients shown are Pearson coefficients. The N for all coefficients excepting the last eight in the far right-hand column is at or near 531. Coefficients of .07 are significant at the .05 level. The N for the remaining eight items is at or near 110. Coefficients of .16 are significant at the .05 level.

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